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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 HO CHI MINH CITY 000303

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SENSITIVE

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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: CLAIMS OF CHURCH CLOSURES AND BEATINGS IN CENTRAL
HIGHLANDS BLUNT GOOD NEWS ON NEW PASTORS

REF: A) HCMC 0084 B) HANOI 0712 C) HCMC 0279

11. (U) Summary: Protestant sources reported that while the overall religious situation in the Central Highlands was still showing signs of improvement, as evidenced by six new ordinations, additional cases of house church closures, destruction of church properties, and arrests and beatings of those involved in the ethnic unrest of 2001 had surfaced since ConGenoffs' last trip to the region in January 2004 (ref A). These sources also described several incidents of alleged discrimination against the predominantly Protestant Ja Rai (Gia Rai) ethnic minority people. End summary.

12. (SBU) Consul General and Poloff met with Pastor Siu Y Kim (protect), a member of the Representative Board of the Vietnamese Government-recognized Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV) in Gia Lai province, and his brother Siu Ya Kop (protect), a HCMC-based medical doctor, for two hours at the ConGen on March 16, 2004. The two are long-time contacts of the ConGen and are generally reliable on subjects (good or bad) where they have personal knowledge.

13. (SBU) Pastor Kim confirmed that the ordination of six new SECV pastors and four new lay pastors had taken place as planned in Gia Lai Province on March 9, 2004 (ref B). He brought photos of the ceremony, which took place at his house. He also reported that the chairman of Gia Lai's Chu Se District People's Committee had agreed to meet with him later in the week to discuss land for a new church. Pastor Kim indicated that past land discussions with provincial officials had not proven productive, but he still was hopeful. While new church registrations and ordinations were welcome news, he believed the GVN was still reluctant to allow the construction of real churches in Gia Lai. He said provincial authorities had already rejected his request for the return of confiscated properties.

14. (SBU) Without giving an exact time frame, Pastor Kim noted that two pre-1975 Christian and Missionary Alliance properties in Gia Lai had recently been damaged or destroyed. One had already been replaced with a kindergarten. He believes provincial authorities have done this to avoid having to return the properties to the SECV. He referred to Official Letter #783, regarding religious properties -- he does not expect to recover church buildings, but at least hopes for compensation. (Note: The CMA is the only Protestant denomination recognized by the GVN at this time. Many CMA churches have chosen not to register with the SECV, however, and operate as underground house churches, often with the tacit approval of local authorities. End note.) According to Pastor Kim, the Gia Lai SECV Representative Board and the HCMC-based SECV Executive Board had both sent protest letters to the provincial authorities, but had yet to receive a response. Pastor Kim had also learned of three house churches in Sa Tay District, Kon Tum Province, which were reportedly shut down between January and March 2004. He noted that these three congregations were not among the 13 CMA house churches that Kon Tum officials tacitly allow to operate.

15. (SBU) Pastor Kim also discussed ongoing refugee problems in Gia Lai. He noted that three ethnic minority men (Ama Suon and Y Lut were the two names he remembered), who had reportedly been hiding in the jungle since the ethnic unrest of 2001, had been captured by police in February and beaten. Police had detained the three after learning they had returned from the jungle. They were discovered hiding under the floorboards of their homes. According to Pastor Kim's sources, one person had died while in police custody. His family members said the body had exhibited signs of head trauma when it was returned by the police. The other two individuals reportedly died a few days after police released them from custody and returned them to their villages. Villagers noted that these two persons were in "bad shape" when they returned. Authorities claimed they had been ill. Pastor Kim dismissed the idea that they might have been suffering the effects of living in the jungle, noting local villagers took good care of those in hiding. (He believes approximately 50 persons remain in the jungle.) As an aside, he mentioned that the police had also confiscated "lots of" cellular telephones when they arrested these three persons.

16. (SBU) Related to ongoing refugee problems, Pastor Kim described the problems faced by several families petitioned as Visas 93 following-to-join cases by relatives who had resettled in the U.S.

via Cambodia in 2001 and 2002. Two families had been charged 2.5 million Vietnamese dong (about USD\$160 dollars) by local authorities for official copies of birth certificates. Three other families have been unable to obtain passports, including a member of one of his Protestant congregations, Ms. R'Mah H'ri. He stated quite emphatically that he believed she would never receive a passport (Ref C provides update on R'Mah H'ri's departure for the U.S.) Pastor Kim noted that government officials were becoming more sophisticated. He said he had heard stories of other families facing similar problems, but could not offer specifics. In a response to a question, he said he could only say for certain that this practice had occurred in Gia Lai Province. Pastor Kim noted that government officials were becoming more sophisticated. Nothing is put in writing; promises, threats, or insinuations are all just spoken.

17. (SBU) Pastor Kim recounted several recent land-use disputes involving ethnic minority Ja Rai and majority Vietnamese Kinh in Gia Lai Province in recent months. He said the government had taken ethnic minority lands for public use under a provincial "master plan," without paying fair compensation. He acknowledged, however, that the "landowners" did not have official deeds or leases for their properties, holding them instead as "traditional" homesteads. One farmer, R'Hlan Yen, in Plei Tu village, Ea Kar District, reportedly had his land seized to build a stadium, while another farmer, Siu Den, fled his village to escape a nine-month prison sentence on charges of illegal deforestation. Pastor Kim spoke at length about an incident in late January 2004, where the ethnic minority residents of Plei Su and other villages verbally squared off at least three times with the management of rubber plantations in Duc Co, Chu Prong and Chu Se Districts. The villagers had reportedly given their traditional lands to the plantations in exchange for employment, but were later fired and replaced by ethnic Vietnamese Kinh brought down from the north. The villagers engaged in several heated verbal confrontations with management, before the provincial People's Committee also became involved. Pastor Kim noted that each confrontation had ended with some sort of oral agreement, but the management had yet to follow through on its promises to restore jobs or pay adequate compensation. Nonetheless, he regarded these three meetings as "victories" for the common people.

18. (SBU) Comment: Pastor Kim and his brother acknowledged that much of their information was based on second or thirdhand reports. Pastor Kim blamed government surveillance and restrictions on travel for his inability to get out and verify some of these claims. As a result, he often made vague statements or lacked details when he made a specific allegation. At one point, he painted a dark picture of ethnic minority Christians being fired from jobs and expelled from school. These are accusations we have heard from other sources periodically over the past two years, and each time the GVN official or schoolmaster -- or sometimes even another pastor -- denies them. Asked to elaborate, Pastor Kim said the government's plan was to discriminate against Protestants until they got tired of the pressure and just gave up and resigned their jobs or left school.

19. (SBU) Comment (cont): That said, Pastor Kim is one of our best contacts. He is sincere in his approach to working with the government as a legal SECV pastor on the one hand, while maintaining his leadership of the mostly ethnic Ja Rai (Gia Rai) house churches. Pastor Kim noted that he did not want to be like some of the Mennonite leaders currently operating in the country, who intentionally try to provoke the GVN in the Central Highlands. Still, the bigger issue is whether the discrimination alleged to be religious in nature is in fact really traditional ethnic discrimination entangled with ownership disputes over tribal lands. Many Ja Rai are Christian, but a sizable minority are not. Pastor Kim's assertion that the oppression is worse for the Christian Ja Rai in Gia Lai Province should be evaluated in the context of the general poverty and politico-economic backwardness of the Central Highlands.

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